# WEEK 3

# Social performance and presentation of self

# Key thinkers: Erving Goffman & Jeffrey C. Alexander

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# Erving Goffman (1922-1982)



- *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956)

- Examines how individuals present themselves and their activity in everyday life to others

  - Goal is "impression management" – controlling the impression others have of us as well as the conduct/response of others

- Stage – Actors – Audience

- Effective performances are those in which the audience acts *as if* the individual has conveyed the desired impression

- Both 'actors' and the audience project a definition of the situation that appears before them; actors through their performance, audience through their response

- Performance – "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (p. 8)

- **Front –** part of individual's performance which functions to define the situation for the observers (intentional or unwitting)

  - **Setting (i.e., scenery, props)**

  - **Personal front – elements of expressive equipment attributed to the performer himself (clothing, sex, age, rank, facial expressions, speech patterns)**

  - **'Appearance' – stimuli which define the performers social status or the social activity he is engaging in**

  - **'Manner' – stimuli signifying the interaction role the performer expects to play (e.g., arrogant, apologetic, angry…)**

- Audience expect coherence between different elements of performance

- When different routines (performances) employ the same front, the social front becomes institutionalized, creating a set of stereotyped expectations and meaning – the front becomes a 'collective representation'

# Regions & region behavior

- **Region** – "any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception" (p. 66) (e.g., classroom, hallway); 'perception' not only in visual terms

  - **Front region –** place where a performance is given

    - Politeness vs. decorum – how one engages with audience vs. how the performer behaves himself in front of audience

    - Decorum is dictated by moral and instrumental requirements

  - **Back region (a.k.a. backstage)** – space where impression made in the front region (i.e., during the performance) is "knowingly contradicted" and where the impressions are "openly constructed" (p. 69)

  - Regions are not universal; they are defined based on the purpose they serve during an individual performance

    - Spaces that serve no purpose during a performance – 'the outside'

    - Outsiders

- **"impression management"** requires maintaining control over regions

# Jeffrey C. Alexander  (1947-  )

▶ Founding figure of **cultural sociology**, a.k.a. the "**strong program**"

▶ To believe in the possibility of a "cultural sociology" is to subscribe to the idea that ***every action, no matter how instrumental, reflexive or coerced vis-a-vis its external environments, is embedded to some extent in a horizon of affect and meaning*** (Alexander 1998).

▶ Characteristics of the Strong Program

  ▶ Culture as an "independent variable" capable of "shaping actions and institutions, providing inputs every bit as vital as more material or instrumental forces" (Alexander & Smith, 2003, p. 12) – **autonomy of culture**

    ▶ Culture is not defined by social life, rather it takes part in defining it

  ▶ **Thick description of texts** (Geertz) and **structural hermeneutics**

  ▶ **Causal specificity –** specifying mechanisms through which culture does its work

# *Performance and Power* (2011)

- **Cultural pragmatics**

  - "Individuals and collectivities strategically direct their actions and mobilize all their available resources, but their instrumental power usually depends on success of a cultural kind. This does not mean that the explanation of their success should be purely symbolic. It means that pragmatic and symbolic dimensions are intertwined" (p. 78)

- Macro-sociological model of social action as cultural performance

- **Cultural performance** is "the social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation." (p. 28)

- Goal: psychological identification and cultural extension (similarly to sacred rituals)

  - Creating an emotional connection between audience, actor, and text, is required if the cultural meanings are to be projected to an audience
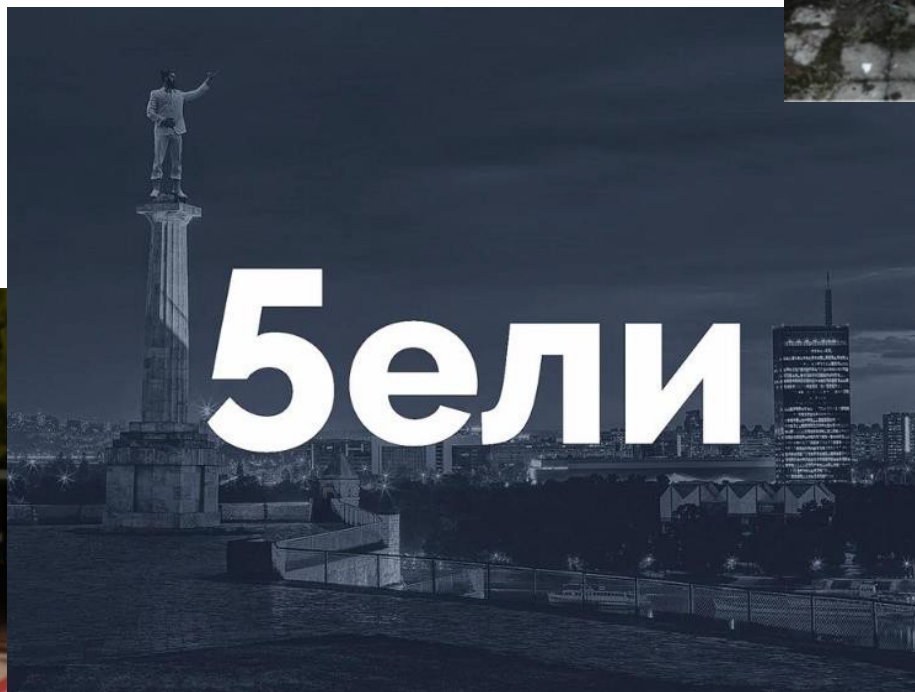
# Fusion, de-fusion, re-fusion

- Depending on the complexity of the collective organization, social and cultural parts are more or less segmented and differentiated, and the elements of a social performance are more or less fused
  - Simple collectivity = less segmentation and greater fusion of elements
  - Complex collectivity = greater segmentation and weaker fusion (i.e., elements of a performance are de-fused)
- To be effective in complex societies, social performances must go through a process of re-fusion (i.e., must become more ritual-like)
- If identification and cultural transmission have been established, the elements of a performance have been **fused**

# Elements of Social Performance

- **Systems of collective representation – background symbols and foreground scripts**
    - **Systems of collective representation – actors' symbol-bearing world(s) from which they draw upon for symbolic referents that inform their performance**
        - **Made up of deep background of collective representations and foreground scripts (i.e., referential texts)**
- **Actors** – the one(s) performing and putting collective representations into practice
    - Literature vs. theatre (walking and talking)
- **Audience/observers** – evaluating performances; have the agency to reject it
    - Actors attempt to achieve identification by conveying authenticity

- **Means of symbolic production** – venue of the performance, expressive equipment, material resources

- **Mise-en-scène** – "putting into the scene"; performances must be directed, to walk and talk a text must be "sequenced temporally and choregraphed spatially" (p. 32)

- **Social power –** social performances are dependent on the distribution of power within a society which determine the access to means of symbolic production (who gets to act, what can be acted, who can observe)

# Case study – Ljubiša Preletačević Beli



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zEhWOa-D3Wo&t=12s